MEN
of the
SOIL

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The Story of
BRICK RURAL LIFE SCHOOL

THE AMERICAN MISSIONARY ASSOCIATION was conceived in 1839 and incorporated in 1846, as a non-denominational, non-sectarian organization. It has as its aim the abolition of "caste and class" in American society, particularly as pertaining to minority groups.

In 1936, The Board of Home Missions of the Congregational Christian churches became its authorized agent, but the character of the Association's work has not been changed. Properties and endowments held by the American Missionary Association, and all trusts, are administered strictly in accord with the terms of wills and agreements.

This pamphlet has been prepared by Ruth A. Morton for the Association.

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General Secretary
CHARLES S. JOHNSON
Director of Race Relations

RUTH A. MORTON
Director of Schools
NEILL A. MCLEAN
Director, Brick Rural Life School
Bricks, North Carolina

287 Fourth Avenue
New York 10, N. Y.

March 1, 1945

The McLeans

Dedicated to

Mr. and Mrs. Neill A. McLean

and Family

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MEN OF THE SOIL

Men of the soil! We have labored unending;
We have fed the world upon the grain that we have grown,
Now with the star of the new day ascending,
Who is there denies our right to reap where we have sown?
Giants of the earth, at last we rise to claim our own.
Justice throughout the land,
Happiness as God has planned,
Who is there denies our right to reap where we have sown?

Men of the soil! We are coming in judgment,
To tell the world till justice rules there is no liberty.
We in our strength are arising as prophets,
Marching on to show the world the dawn that is to be.
There's a lightning in the sky,
There's a thunder shouting high;
We will never stop until the sons of men are free. *

Members of the credit union loan committee were sitting in their accustomed places, receiving deposits and making loans, when a brown-eyed, brown-skinned lad of ten shoved past his elders. Pushing a dollar bill into the treasurer's hand, he said, "Here, I earned it in the peanuts. Please put it to work for me." He waited for the deposit to be entered in his book, then scampered off.

This was Saturday, the day to go to town. The Square would be crowded with mule teams, automobiles and people. They would bargain good-naturedly, spend too lavishly, worry about it on the long, slow ride back. Those from the Bricks community would buy only those articles which could not be purchased at their own coöperative. There would be good-natured bragging about this store which belonged to everyone. Members would tell how the savings were used. There

* Written by Harold Hildreth during the Chicago milk strike in 1928. Set to the tune of an old Danish song. Permission to quote given by the Social Recreation Union, Delaware, Ohio.

"A pleasant place now."

would be the exchange of news and gossip, the meeting of strangers recently come to the countryside, the weekly visit with relatives. And then—home.

Home was a pleasant place now. Since the coming of the TVA, there had been electricity. Farm work was easier. The new refrigerator would keep weekly purchases of food from spoiling. There were lights so the family could read. When the war was over, there would be a pump to carry water to the house and out to the farm. The child knew, for he had attended the Community Council meetings.

It had not always been so at Bricks. Fifty years before, Mrs. Joseph K. Brick, of Brooklyn, New York, inherited a large farm fifteen miles from Rocky Mount, North Carolina. After talking with her pastor, and with Dr. Augustus F. Beard, she deeded the place to the American Missionary Association, of which Dr. Beard was Secretary. The Association was engaged in establishing schools in handicapped areas in the South. As time passed, Mrs. Brick decided to see what was happening on the farm. She found the people so anxious to learn, that throughout her life her money and efforts were spent in the building

of a first-class educational institution. Following the American pattern, it grew from a grade to a high school, and later into a junior college. Through all those years, Mr. T. S. Inborden served as its versatile principal.

Residents from the community, the state, and beyond came to appreciate the school. It had a good reputation. Work was thorough, ideals high. Folks who had been sharecroppers all their lives tried to move onto the large Brick farm or to secure places as tenants nearby, so that their children might have the educational opportunities which had formerly been denied them. The people delighted in the imposing buildings, the well-kept campus, the "A" rating. They liked the folk who came from New York, for they who had had so little, felt important in their presence. At the college there were jobs in the laundry or on the campus. If something were needed it did not occur to the people to get it for themselves. They asked the Association. Few were turned away.

The farmers did not realize that they shared very little in the benefits of this learning. Their homes were shacks, their land poorly tended, their lives barren of beauty. The constant asking for second-rate clothes and second-rate jobs made second-rate personalities. Paternalism, created on the one hand by the pattern of tenant "furnishing", and deepened on the other by well-meaning charitable organizations, had robbed them of initiative and self-reliance. They worked that their children might be more successful.

Then came the depression of 1929. The Association had to withdraw support from many of its schools, including Bricks. The college closed. The people were confused. They had lost their jobs and the chance for their children's education. They did not seem as important as before. They thought they were forgotten.

It had been a long-time policy of the American Missionary Association, however, to withdraw its support from schools whenever the state was ready to assume that obligation, or whenever population shifts placed the institution in a marginal position, or when other factors made the change wise. Nevertheless, as these shifts took place, it was

realized that some intangible force for good went out with the institution. State superintendents of education and town and county officers sometimes pleaded for "even a fifty dollar gift so that your influence may continue in the community." Such requests came with increasing frequency. During the years when many schools were affected adversely by the depression, various ways were found to do such things coöperatively, often producing surprising progress in community life. Such was the case at Bricks.

Plans were made with the county superintendents of the three counties converging on the Brick farm to maintain a centralized free public grade and high school. To enrich the program, the Association offered to pay part of the salaries of four teachers, this to terminate at the end of three years. In the same way the county boards, the people, and the Association coöperated in purchasing buses so that children living at a distance might have an opportunity for free schooling. Those choosing to go to college might select one of several very good ones in their own state.

Mr. Neill McLean was the vocational agriculture teacher, having taught for one year under a coöperative arrangement between the state and the Association. The second year he was asked to become the full-time director of community services. Mr. McLean was an agricultural graduate of Hampton Institute, and had done advanced work at Cornell University, but he never ceased to be a farmer. His hands were as rough as the people's. Instead of telling them what to do, he showed them. To get the community work started, the Association offered the 1,100 acre farm to a group of tenants. Rent would be in cash. There was insistence then, as there is now, that this bill is the first to be paid. It is one for which we have had to secure an occasional lien on a crop. Thus was taken the beginning step in counteracting past paternalistic practices.

Tenants were to live at Bricks for a five-year period. During that time they would be known as students of the Brick Rural Life School. "Classes" would be in the homes and in the fields, learning to do the "common things of life uncommonly well." It was to be strictly a

business proposition. Mr. McLean's salary would be paid. Whatever the people would have for the community work otherwise, would have to come from the money from farm rentals or through solicitations among themselves.

Difficulties were legion. The farmers had seldom dealt in cash. Trading had been in cotton, tobacco, and peanuts. Few knew how to figure with the buyers. Those who did were afraid to protest if prices were unfair, for they were usually in debt to the dealer. There was still hope that the Association would do things *for* them. They were reluctant to learn new ideas. They suffered from inertia.

It was expected that at the end of the five-year period, a student family would have established character credit with government agencies and saved money for the down payment on a farm of its own. Most of the families started with debts, children, a few outmoded tools, a little feed, and some hogs. None brought cows. Even though Mr. McLean worked long hours helping here, correcting there, progress was slow. Since there were no regular "classes" the days did not seem different from before. To awaken their thinking, re-train their habits, and enliven their living, the Short Term Session of the Brick

Culling Chickens

Rural Life School was begun. Since then, during January and February when the farm work is slack, young people and at times entire families from the surrounding countryside, have come to stay in one of the old college dormitories. Here they learn to live together, sharing in work, study and fun.

Leaders come from Hampton Institute, from New York, Georgia, Florida, Alabama and elsewhere. With their help, farmers have learned to farm scientifically, build up their soil, cull chickens, work out proper man-animal-land relationships, budget their time and their money. They learn to figure in cash, pay their rent and other bills when the harvesting is done, and then apportion the remainder to last throughout the year. This basic training in building economic security through efficient farm methods and coöperative endeavors undergirds all other phases of the program. There are lessons in home nursing, child care, home planning, and home decoration. There are low-cost, nourishing meals. Gardens are laid out. Homes and surroundings are much improved, for beauty as well as efficiency is emphasized.

Several years ago the main discussion centered about the meaning

Clinic, Co-op, Cannery, Post-office

of and need for education in public health. Upon explaining this need to the Director of the State Department of Public Health, the farmers were promised one-half the amount necessary for a nurse's salary and clinic expenses, if they would provide the remainder. The people set to work. During the plowing and planting season, solicitations for funds were made between nine o'clock and midnight. Within six weeks, 360 families had contributed, no one giving less than one dollar, and no one more than five. During the ensuing years interest in the work, and subscriptions for its continuation, have never lagged. Emphasis has been upon the people's responsibility for their own health and welfare. The nurse is among them to guide their efforts. Representatives from each of the thirteen neighborhoods making up the Bricks community, report to her monthly as to how thoroughly they practice what they have learned. The original Health Council has now become the Community Planning Council, with duties growing as vision develops.

Farmers once silent before those they considered superiors, now talk freely with secretaries of the Association about their plans. On one such occasion, evidence was given of increasing dissatisfaction with the farm houses. Nicely painted exteriors only served to point up the poor foundations, small and overcrowded rooms, the lack of minimum living facilities. During the entire eight weeks of that school session, there was a study of individual house plans, and of community planning in relation to housing. Ideas for rebuilding took shape, but the war postponed this part of the program.

During the planning of housing, the question was raised as to how such improvements would be financed. The Association had promised the community only the services of Mr. McLean. After much discussion, it was agreed that rentals from the farm and income from the forest would form the economic basis of the community program. Each January members of the Community Planning Council draw up an annual budget. Income must pay for incidental building repairs, farm improvements, expenses of the Short Term School, community functions, etc. Actually, funds are too limited to cover the needs. The problem of financing major building programs is not yet solved.

This wrestling with limited funds in the face of growing community desires is one of the most realistic elements in the training program, teaching the necessity for keeping one's eyes on the horizon, while grappling with discouraging details.

"One is a teacher."

The intangible values accruing from these eight weeks of work and study have been many. One of the most important is the changing attitude toward marriage. Where parents once laughed at their children when they started having dates, they now try to understand and counsel with them. They talk with growing frankness of the sort of persons they wish their children to marry, and what husbands and wives should expect of each other. There have been some lovely romances resulting from the Short Term Sessions. All these young couples own their own farms. Some are now parents. One student is a home economics teacher at Fessenden Academy.

The test of what the farmers were actually learning came when the excitement of these eight weeks was over. All learning was hard, especially at the beginning, but the hardest of all was working together. The first effort to do one particular task coöperatively came when the credit union was organized in 1936. It started with thirty-four members who gradually built their savings to sixty-eight dollars. While there was little money, that which the people did have was not deposited because they did not trust each other. Then one

day the lightning struck a barn, killing the livestock. Mr. McLean pointed out what it would mean if the owner had to borrow money from professional money-lenders. In the emergency, the credit union savings, plus whatever additional amounts could be secured, were taken to make the first loan at a reasonable rate of interest. When the obligation was paid promptly because "it makes one feel cheap to be in debt to the man next door", the group began to believe in themselves. The credit union now has capital deposits of $5,000. Its first major loan for land purchase has been made.

After this, events moved more quickly. Wheat was planted, and livestock, fertilizer, feed, seed, tools, and groceries purchased coöperatively. Garden clubs were organized. A community "missionary" society had as its chief function the systematic care of the sick, not only at the beside of the patient, but in the care of the home, children, crops and livestock. "No one," said one of the women, "should suffer economic loss because of illness." Farming practices improved to such a point that ten farm families pooled funds to buy a $3,900 tractor with equipment complete for plowing, planting, harrowing, sawing wood, grinding feed and meal, and picking peanuts. It is paid for,

"They now rate each other."

every penny, and funds are being set aside regularly for repairs and replacements. The coöperative store, started in 1938 and doing a business of $7,000 that year, did $30,000 last year. Whereas a decade ago, the people were not very neighborly, they now rate each other annually on their ability as farmers, on how well they coöperate with each other, and whether each is a responsible member of the community. No one is asked to become a resident-student without first being "interviewed" and rated by the other farmers. No one may be asked to leave before the end of the five-year period, except by consent of the group.

Growth still comes sporadically. As in many farming communities, children are considered economic assets. While attitudes are improving, it took an unpleasant roadhouse experience to teach the parents that children have rights too. Young people's groups are being organized slowly. Sons are beginning to have an opportunity to experiment with their own farming methods. Daughters are being given the chance to express their ideas within the home. There is talk now about the need for club and play rooms where families may gather for sociability. Farmers are asking whether, with the expense of the nurse, they can afford to contribute money for a community recreation director.

The most baffling problem is that of land purchase. It is hard for one whose farm is small to make a living, and much harder for one whose skin happens to be dark. He must fight all the battles of all small landholders, plus that of race prejudice. Those who do succeed in getting a foothold only too often are forced to purchase marginal land. Poor land means poor crops, debt, mortgage, foreclosure, tenancy. In face of this, however, little colonies are springing up here and there. Through coöperation they are making good against great odds. This gives the timid courage to try.

The ideas of the community have spread far. There are now conferences on the campus for about eight months of the year. In addition to the Short Term Session, the principals of the Association's schools meet here often. The Fireside Chat, a group of professional

"Principals . . . meet here often."

college and government folk interested in rural life, come regularly to note progress. There is an all-summer camp for orphan children, financed and operated entirely by the Parent Teacher Association of North Carolina.

Ten years ago there were eight families. Now in the Bricks community alone there are 400 families who are active members of coöperative enterprises. Throughout this section of eastern North Carolina, there are 3,250 family members in thirty-five credit unions, having total deposits of $186,000. Four coöperative stores did $200,000 business last year. These groups are now organized into the Eastern Carolina Coöperative Association, with headquarters at Brick. In this wider service Mr. S. P. Dean of Columbia, North Carolina, and Mr. McLean have been joint leaders.

No one single factor influences the quality of rural life more than religion. The rural minister has an opportunity and an influence which he often fails to sense, or does not know how to use intelligently. The religious life of the Bricks area followed the usual pattern. When the college was in session, community folk attended the preaching services because they wanted to be part of the student group.

When the college closed, no basic interest remained. They went to their own denominational churches several miles distant. After the broadening discussions of the Short Term Sessions, but more particularly when people learned to have faith in each other, religion became a vital part of everyday life, rather than just a weekly church service. A united Community Church was begun. Into the charter was written the provision that it is to "develop and maintain a program of religious activities, based on and growing out of our community life." Regular services are held every fourth Sunday. The Sunday school meets every week.

Ministers from the area are beginning to see that religion is economics and health, beauty and fun, as well as prayer and preaching. They now hold an annual institute at Bricks lasting from three weeks to a month. Ways of making the teachings of Jesus meaningful in community life are studied. As many as two hundred and fifty ministers and lay workers attend this institute. Not only does one notice the change in church properties with their fresh coats of paint and landscaped surroundings, but there are better sermons and growing programs of weekday activities.

To know the Brick Rural Life School it is not enough to read this pamphlet or to make a hurried call of a few hours or even a few days. This is a school of *living*. To know it one should live with it—live with it through the planting season and under the hot sun during cultivation time; at the harvest when cotton is picked, peanuts dug, and tobacco cured; during the Short Term Session in January and February; at the firesides of the farmers in their cottages; at credit union meetings; drinking a Coca Cola with the customers of the Co-Op store; at community worship on Sunday. All that is on the surface at Bricks does not glitter, but if you are looking for gold, yea, fine gold, you will find it *if* you stay long enough.

ASSOCIATION SERVICES IN BRIEF

The American Missionary Association is responsible for substantial support to the following colleges: Dillard University, New Orleans, Louisiana; LeMoyne College, Memphis, Tennessee; Talladega College, Talladega, Alabama; Tillotson College, Austin, Texas; Tougaloo College, Tougaloo, Mississippi. In addition, it supports the Department of Religion at Fisk University, Nashville, Tennessee.

Among the many primary and secondary schools established over the years, Fessenden Academy, Martin, Florida, and Pleasant Hill Academy, Pleasant Hill, Tennessee, both boarding schools, are the only two now supported entirely by the Association in coöperation with tuition-paying students. Avery Institute at Charleston, South Carolina, became a project of the citizens of that city in September 1944, with the Association continuing a modest appropriation. Lincoln Academy, Kings Mountain, North Carolina, is unique in that it is now a consolidated public grade and high school, with the Association continuing a boarding department and commmunity work. Summer conferences and institutes are held regularly on this well-known and much-loved campus.

Dorchester Academy, at McIntosh, Georgia, was merged with the county school in 1940, at which time the Association helped the County Board of Education to enlarge an already established, more centrally located building four miles away. There was also coöperation in the securing of a bus. The Association maintains a full-time community worker at the Dorchester site who, with the people, is developing a Bricks type of work, adapted to the particular conditions of the community. Ballard School, Macon, Georgia, now a city school, receives modest aid from the Association. A community program is being developed by the people with the aid of the Association. Lincoln School, Marion, Alabama; Trinity School, Athens, Alabama; and Cotton

Valley School, Tuskegee, Alabama, are all slowly becoming public institutions, although the Association continues to carry the major financial load in each. Community workers are employed and are at work with the people in these areas.

The Association maintains the Ryder Hospital in Humacao, Puerto Rico, and aids the Congregational Christian churches on the Island.

The Race Relations Department, under the direction of Dr. Charles S. Johnson, who maintains his headquarters at Fisk University, Nashville, Tennessee, renders educational and counselor service in tension areas, to help remove the "sins of caste and class" in American life.

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